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The Owl and the Lantern: Marianne Moore at Bryn Mawr

When Tom Jackson asked me to participate in Bryn Mawr's centenary celebration by presenting some biographical and historical remarks about Marianne Moore, I was both pleased and slightly overwhelmed. I had already read Marianne's letters from college at the Rosenbach Museum & Library in Philadelphia—more than once—but never with the question in mind: what was her experience at Bryn Mawr? And what bearing did it have on her life as a writer? Part of my preparation was to take Maggie Holley's "Old Campus" tour last summer—in and out of the buildings that stood here in Marianne's day, with particular attention to the owl gate—to provide the proper images needed to read the letters in context. Another aid was provided by Lucy West who showed me two college scrapbooks compiled by classmates of Marianne—filled with party favors and programs for May Day; and Leo Dolenski had already led me to photographs of Marianne in class plays and at graduation and had found for me a previously unknown "review" by Marianne published in the student magazine in 1909. All of these resources helped me to see the splendor and excitement of a college just twenty years old when the two poets we celebrate entered its halls in 1905.

I have entitled my talk today "The Owl and the Lantern" to reflect two of Bryn Mawr's symbols which have been in force from the college's earliest days and which can be said to affect the lives of its students: the owl, symbol of Pallas Athena, the goddess of wisdom, and the lantern, the symbol of learning passed from class to class. Certainly, wisdom and learning were two gifts of the college to Marianne Moore, whose four years here were among the most important of her life, in her development both as a person and as a writer.

Marianne's letters home during her years here, 1905 to 1909, are a rich offering. She wrote nearly three times a week, never missing the sabbath letter. Some letters reached 24 pages, and while a number of notes and postcards concern the mechanics of sending the wash home or transferring the railroad mileage book to her brother at Yale, most of the communications tell of college events, friends, classes, teachers, and of course, writing. Marianne in later life suggested that her passion for writing began in the years after college, when she started professional publication of poems and essays. What her letters from college reveal is that she was seriously smitten by the love of writing when she was a sophomore, and that this yearning continued undeterred by reverses of every sort.

We know Marianne to have been a superb perceiver, and in this talk I would like first to trace her perceptions of her college world—some of them hilarious—and then to see, through her own words, the emergence of the young writer as she passed through the halls of wisdom and learning at Bryn Mawr.

Marianne came to Bryn Mawr after secondary school at the Metzger Institute in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where her mother taught English. In the ordinary course of things, she might have gone to Dickinson College there in town, or to Wilson in Chambersburg, for which Metzger was a kind of feeder school. But as it happened, the influence of Bryn Mawr was already upon the Moores. Dr. George Norcross, pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church in Carlisle, and his family were the Moores' closest friends. The three Norcross daughters had all attended Bryn Mawr, graduating in the classes of 1897, 1899, and 1900. The youngest, Mary, had worked at the college after graduation for a year or two, and she returned to Carlisle at the time Marianne was beginning to think about college. It became her role to prep Marianne for the Bryn Mawr matriculation exams, and by the opening of term, 1905, Marianne had successfully completed 13 of the 15 necessary exams. Marianne was one of 111 girls in the class of 1909, and one of 37 without "conditions"—required non-credit courses to make up for deficiencies.

Mary Norcross accompanied Marianne to Bryn Mawr in late September, 1905, stayed with her at "The Shipleys" while she took her last two exams, installed her in #53, Pembroek East, and returned to Carlisle. Although Marianne's first letters to her mother reflect the excitement of being at last at college, letters to Mary reveal a very homesick freshman.

I hate to tell you but I am homesick. I planned to say nothing about it [but I have not been able to eat since you left and am tottery on my legs. Would it be worth while to get medicine of any sort?] (6 October 1905)

And two days later:

I don't consider leaving for a moment but as is natural don't see how I am ever to live here for two or three months....I can hardly wait for next Sabbath to come when I can lie on my couch and read Pilgrim's Progress, Milton, or the Bible. (8 October 1905)

But a month later, the tide had turned: "Sometimes I can't realize that I am really here, that I have gotten in and that I am wandering through the enchanted land as I had pictured to myself" (2 November 1905). The usual medicine had worked: classes, friends, and in the case of Bryn Mawr, rituals. In late October, the freshmen received their first symbols of learning, caps and gowns, Marianne's having been bequeathed from the Norcross Girls. (A well-worn, if not disintegrating gown was a status symbol.) When lantern night was imminent, in early November, Marianne's
class hid their gowns because they had learned that in a previous year, the sophomores had confiscated them and strung them on a line from Denbigh to Merion. Such modest hazing went on to the distress of President Thomas who felt that such activities should be confined to men’s colleges.

On lantern night, the first major ritual, the sophomores presented the freshmen with real lanterns in Pembroke Arch and led a solemn procession to Denbigh. The official song was “Pallas Athenae,” the 1893 class song, followed on this and many another occasion by the singing of all the class songs until there were so many that the girls sang only those of either the odd or the even years. For lantern night, the girls were to dress in white, no matter the weather. Marianne reported:

I don’t know what I wouldn’t have given to have you here Lantern night. We all assembled back of Radnor and found partners for the procession. I had not been able to get our song so hastily learned it. The tune is a beauty and although the words are somewhat hackneyed and redundant the effect of the whole is rare. The semicircle formed in front of Denbigh was one of the prettiest sights I have ever seen. The long line of white between the black edges of the gowns was just regular enough to be pretty....I have never heard such perfect singing in my life. It was clear and strong with the second part coming in every now and then, so that the harmony was exquisite....Soon the red lights began to gleam and the leaders of the procession could be seen advancing....we marched down to Radnor singing our song....through Merion, Denbigh and Pen East surrounded by crowds of people, finally stopping under the arch. All the lantern songs and all the class songs and cheers were given and we dispersed. (12 November 1905)

Among the cheers was the first written by the class of 1909, commemorating the class color: “Rah, rah, red, red, nineteen nine go ahead!” (4 October 1905). Later, the class upgraded its cheer to “Rubber, rubber, rubber rex, MDCCCCXIX.”

Receptions of various kinds took place during the year; the first for the freshmen was that given by The Dean, as President M. Carey Thomas was always called, due to her previous position as dean.

I knew something great took place Thursday afternoon but could not remember what. It was the Dean’s reception, perhaps the most newsworthy event yet. As all the girls wore their Sunday best I wore my white wool dress, white hat, white gloves and no coat. We crossed our names off the finding list at the door to let the Dean know how many of us did her the honor of being present. A Japanese butler showed us upstairs or right into the library as the case might be. I was with Dorothy North....We soon heard tales of the fascinating and magnificent upstairs and Dorothy needs must change her mind and take her jacket up....When the whole band of Freshmen in starched frills, silk, or fur as the case might be were assembled, Miss Thomas appeared in a cream lace dress trimmed here and there with pink paisantry....We were told the traditions of the college

as to having no fraternities and intercollegiate sports and were told that the honor of Bryn Mawr was in our hands. We were in short flattered and warned within an inch of our lives. (29 October 1905)

Soon the seniors gave a reception in the gym. Marianne reported not only on the clothing, the seniors in “low cut dresses and flowers and many wore diamonds on hair and on body,” but also, like collegians of every era, on the food—“lemonade and salad sandwiches” (22 October 1905). Another gala featured “partridges on toast,...some curious nut salad, and a thousand wonderful things I forget about,...and ice cream in the form of owls” (2 November 1905).

Less formal were the teas given in their rooms by the students. During the height of the tea season, that is when there were no exams or vacations, Marianne was able to log as many as three in an afternoon. They were occasioned by birthdays, visiting mothers and brothers, or friends from other colleges, and they were followed by thank-you visits. After her first month, Marianne had to ask her mother: “Is it necessary to call on people that give teas if three or four give one together?” (2 November 1905).

Marianne never mentions the dining room food. In her day, each dormitory served its own meals in a formal setting. The students were expected to dress in at least their best shirtswaits for dinner, which began promptly at 6:30. (If a student were more than 15 minutes late, she found the doors locked and herself fined seventy-five cents. If she made a request before 7, she could have milk, bread and butter sent to her room for twenty-five cents.) One’s napkin ring was placed at a table for 8 or 10, the seating assignment for the year. House wardens and other college staff members presided at some tables, maids waited on tables and polite conversation was the rule: “[We discussed] the wearing of mourning as a legitimate convention,...Howard Pyle and the Swedeborg and the Tip and English readers and vacation and scenery painting and wardens and the alumnae and Wagner and so on and forest brooks” (3 February 1908). The formality broke down during vacations, as this comment from a semester break suggests: “At meals we have in the true sense, a picnic—we are disgraceful bad behaved, setting up a fork and using napkin rings for quots, snapping up bits of bread like puppies when thrown into the air, etc.” (3 February 1908).

Bryn Mawters (Bryn Marvels to Marianne) were free to go off campus whenever they wished, needing chaperones only to go to Philadelphia at night. On Saturdays, Marianne took advantage of Bryn Mawr’s proximity to Philadelphia. Because of a back problem, she went to a chiropractor each week. This visit was sometimes followed by shopping—she was searching for “a colonial soldier’s hat—black, with nothing on it,” later to be the famous tricorne—but more often she went to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts or the Academy of Music. A few of the delights were Paderewski and Caruso, Tannhauser, A Doll’s House, Maude Adams as Peter Pan, sculpture by Rodin and Saint-Gaudens, and many paintings, one of which by John White Alexander became an image in her college short story “Pym.”

Sundays were another matter. Marianne attended any one of several nearby churches, read from the Bible, Bunyan, or Milton, walked, visited with friends, and wrote letters. It was her family’s custom not to work, or to cause others to work, on
the sabbath. Studying, of course, was work, and that was proscribed. Her friends found this behavior amazing, but, as Marianne wrote home: "I am never afraid to say what my principles are and often shock people by my Sabbath non-studying principles" (14 October 1904).

Marianne's Sunday practice is not meant to suggest that she eschewed any of the merriment that abounded on the campus. She was always involved in the class plays—given by each class to each other. The plays were written by the students, usually as take-offs on well-known stories, and many of them were costumed by a Philadelphia theatrical firm. Marianne appeared as an attendant to Rowena in "Ivanhoe the Eleventh," which included a chorus of "brimides and sulfides" (18 April 1907), and as a guest at a houseparty in "When Knighthood was in Favor." She relished a line from the latter: "This party has a little too much esprit de coc to suit my taste" (18 April 1909). Another show took place in the swimming pool. In Marianne's description:

It was a combination of Lohengrin and Siegfried...the Rhine maidens wore bathing suits and green batting tales...Lohengrin wore a gorgeous suit made up of green with a white scarf and a whitewinged helmet...[T]he raft approached slowly with him on it (towed by a rope) and he sprang to the bank—it was most realistic—saying "I swear I thought I'd never get here/ why down upon the Sewanee river" (20 March 1908).

Other plays were serious, such as Medea, in Gilbert Murray's translation, and Romeo and Juliet (The Dean was heard to say, of the balcony scene, "Lucy, it is an emotion" [17 May 1908]).

Formal dances were held on campus, but nary a college man attended. The students decorated the gym to within an inch of its life—streamers, flowers, food, of course, usually with a theme. The members of the class giving the dance each invited a student from the class in whose honor it was being given—an elaborate ritual of making sure to line up one's best friend if possible. Dance cards were issued to each invitee and her friends dutifully signed up for the dances listed: tinsel, barndance, cotillion, twostep, waltz, cotillion, (supper) and a final barn dance. Marianne usually presented her guest with violets or pansies, purchased at Pennock's in town. Sometimes, fancy dress was required, and the faculty participated. The director of athletics, the renowned Constance Applebee, Marianne wrote, "was stunning...& came as a hockey field in a dark green suit like her regular umpire one, in a red tam with white lines marking the field all over her and little 1908 & 1909 teams at play" (11 November 1906). Actually, dance was a subject in Miss Applebee's department which offered heavy gym, light gym, fencing and dancing (the students referred to Henry James as Heavy Gym [15 March 1907]), and Marianne took dancing, served on the class drill team, and as goalie and full-back on the second string in hockey, which she dearly loved. Supposedly, training was required for hockey. Marianne writes in October, freshman year:

From this time on everyone who goes out for hockey has to train. We don't do the inhuman things the boys do when in training. We can eat anything at meals except preserves cake and pastry, ice cream included. We can not eat between meals and have to go to bed at 10:30, and drink lots of water. (29 October 1905)

It is hard to see how this regimen survived that of the teas, but Marianne does not give us that data.

There were other simple pleasures that kept one's mind off quizzes and exams: an auction in the dorm—Gibson girl posters, hockey sticks, scarves; straw rides, followed by a game of "ring around the rosy" in Pembroke Arch; something called "walking like worms"; Looby-loo; and a novel hockey game between the "Perfect ladies of Bryn Mawr" (class of 1909) and the mere "ladies of Bryn Mawr" (class of 1910). Marianne describes it in a letter: "The idea was to have everyone in tights or evening gowns or feather hats...some wore long pongee coats and ermine furs, one in a hat with sparrow feathers...We cheered, rah, rah, rah, rah, rah, rah, perfect ladies of Bryn Mawr" (14 December 1908).

But no activities could compete in scope or scale with the grand May Day of 1906. Even the freshman class play was cancelled as preparations accelerated. Beginning early in the spring, the students were given their roles for the festivals: morris dancers, chimney sweeps, actors, bearers and courtiers, with practice held after classes. When the great day came, two twelve-car trains were especially engaged to bring visitors from Philadelphia for the events, which began at noon. First came the procession, led by "12 heralds, gorgeously appareled in white and gold," the lord and lady of the May on horseback, maypole dancers, the great worthies: Hector, Alexander, Julius Caesar, Joshua, David, Judas Maccabaeus, King Arthur, Charlemagne, and Godfrey of Bouillon, morris and maypole dancers, and finally the maypoles themselves, borne by white oxen. Four short sketches were presented at different stations on campus; Pyramus and Thisbe, King Richard at Sherwood Forest, The Plays of St. George, and the Masque of Flowers—and they were repeated three or four times during the afternoon. Marianne spent that day as an attendant to the lord and lady of the May. In a photograph in the next day's Philadelphian Inquirer, she is seen, dressed in green brocade, seated among the royal court.

May Day was not just an event to entertain the students: President Thomas charged admission and made it a successful fundraiser. M. Carey Thomas was a masterful college president, a vigorous exponent of the intellectual life, who wanted for girls the same education their brothers were receiving at Harvard or Yale. She had surmounted great obstacles in receiving her Ph.D. summa cum laude from Zurich, had to deal at Bryn Mawr with a sometimes recalcitrant board of trustees, and had seen a promising Professor Woodrow Wilson decamp for a higher salary elsewhere (he was the only United States president whom she did not invite to speak at commencement). She was called impatient in her energy but entirely shrewd. Marianne respected her of course, but she had heard about "The Dean's" quirkiness for years from the Norcrosses, and her comments in letters home were meant to be read by Mary Norcross as well. Here are some of Marianne's reports:
The Dean said we can’t have our Freshman show on account of devoting our energies to May Day; the cheering in Pembroke must be stopped; or slang is creating unfavorable comment all over the country. Miss Thomas is indeed a “wonderful woman.” Everybody says the dean’s getting unpleasantly eccentric. At this rate the college [will soon be] a school for saints. (February 1906)

Later, she wrote: “The Dean made a noble harangue against teas, dances and making our halls of residence the green rooms of a theater, and for the worthy improvement of all ours in this intellect(u)al atmosphere.” (11 November 1906). And:

She said that she had once hoped that placing girls in the favorable surroundings of a place like this they could be made into anything, but now she knew that was asking too much that heredity was more powerful than environment. That for example the Hanoverian family in England has always been “deadly dull, and passed into lower and lower stages of mediocrity,” (she excepted Victoria). (3 January 1907)

And: “She descanted upon the 3 best speakers of American college presidents... ending ‘of course we cannot give Pres. Eliot of Harvard a platform upon which to express his reactionary views upon the subject of woman’s education’ ” (7 April 1907). And: “In chapel the Dean said to pronounce Blouse ‘blouze’ and of course, b-double-e-n, bean, and w-e-e, ware.” Within a few days, the students wrote a play, “The Metamorphosis of Mary,” which included the following lines: "O you’re taking Bi. Don’t you love it? O Marjorie, do you remember when sue spilt her earthworm down her Blouze? Chorus: ‘Had it not bean for me, I vow and declare, those students would never have bean what they ware.’ ‘"

Cary Thomas was the protectress of both the owl and the lantern. Although president, she still served as dean, approving each student’s programme and hearing “orals,” the required oral sight translations in two languages for which each student, alone, confronted a berobed Dean and two faculty members. She chose a remarkable faculty of gifted young academics, of whom Marianne had nineteen courses over the years. And although she bewailed some of the students’ extracurricular activities as frivolous, she wisely allowed them as a necessary escape valve in a very demanding program. At the time of Bryn Mawr’s founding, and continuing for a generation, there was a suspicion abroad that too much education was not a good thing for the female of the species. Supporters of this untried proposition thought that excessive booklearning would interfere not only with a girl’s mental and “nervous” balance but possibly with her genes. In helping to dispense this foolishness, President Thomas designed a curriculum that seems daunting even today.

The required courses included two years of English, taken in the first two years, 5 hours a week, divided among Lectures followed by interviews concerning the reading list; composition, which involved writing a paper every week and an interview at which to hear criticism of it; and elocution given by a Mr. King, known as the White Petunia). Also required were history of philosophy, general philosophy, and general psychology. Single subjects such as English or history were not considered majors; rather, one chose a major group—Latin and English, French, Italian, and Spanish, or as in Marianne’s case, History and Political Economy (in which she was one of four in her year). Marianne had forty-nine hours in her major, including two semesters of medieval history and one of Oriental history, two of law, and the rest called either History or Political Economy. In addition, she took twenty-two hours of biology, eleven Latin, ten Italian, two history of Christian doctrine, and two imitative writing.

She had two narrow escapes in her progress through college. Toward the end of her sophomore year, her grades were threateningly low. The grading system used Passed, Merit, Credit, and High Credit (a student receiving the last was expected to throw a party—it was that unusual). Only grades of merit and above counted toward a degree. As a sophomore, Marianne drew only Passed in English and history. Before semester exams, she wrote: “This is the season when all begin to ask, is Bryn Mawr the earthly paradise: I know only too well it is and am afraid I won’t be able to enjoy it long” (23 January 1907). And at the end of the year: “I am broken up to think of not coming back. I ought to be able to try it oughtn’t I?” (1 June 1907). Indeed, she did come back, but in her senior year, at semesters, she was shocked to learn that she needed 60 merits by that time—not in June—to graduate. Fortunately, her history of philosophy exam, which was in the balance, went well and she had more than the necessary grades.

The redoubtable Miss Lucy Donnelly taught the lecture portion of the required English courses and supervised the others. She was both nemesis and friend to Marianne, whose difficulties in English are best described by her:

Miss Donnelly spent the whole hour this morning talking about these papers and critical work in general, I never enjoyed an hour so much...She said there were three kinds of criticism, that which pronounces judgement like Arnold’s and Johnson’s, that which analyses impersonally; and the model, personal kind like Pater’s. She said we must have personal adventures with the book or subject to be criticised. (2 November 1905)

And at the end of the semester, “I am so uplifted to think I am not a perfect young goat in English. Miss Donnelly said there was almost an incredible improvement. Of course that isn’t saying much for she told me today my grade last time was 45” (8 January 1906). And a week later, of a critical paper: “Miss Marsh said, ‘Promises well, but be sure you get enough substance, your last paper was a network of quotations’ ” (17 January 1906).

Later, as a sophomore, Marianne began to hear the kind of criticism that kept her out of an English major:

I had an interview today. Miss [Fullerton] says Please a little lucidity! Your obscurity becomes greater and greater. You remind me Miss Moore, in all your work—in some of your things in the Tipyn o’Bob—of Rosetti. 'He
might have been great if he had thought his poems. ‘I caved in with delight naturally but feel faint with despair at the same time as I’ve been working like a dawg so far as thought goes. (20 March 1907).

Miss Fullerton said on my weekly “You have narrative and descriptive ability I think but you must pay more attention to the requirements.” She also said I was “incoherent!” and had no idea how to manage situations. I try now to do the grind style of work and though it is not exciting, it is worthwhile. (19 February 1907)

I had an interview with Miss F. today and she says the development of my Stevenson paper is “on the whole” good. She says it’s a good merit. My small heart swelled with pride. (27 April 1907)

Merit was a grade above “passed” but below the needed “credit.” At the end of her sophomore year, Marianne knew she would have to choose other than English:

I saw [Miss Donnelly] yesterday. She advises me not to major in Eng. if I want to be sure of my Degree. She says I have ideas and often do nice work for her but that my work is uneven. That I might fail and she would “hate awfully to have me fail.”...I am not going to take English therefore, but law history and politics. It’s too late in the day for biology. (9 May 1907)

Finally allowed to take an English elective, she took Imitative Writing in her last semester with Georgiana Goddard King.

I had an interview w. Miss King this afternoon...She is most critical, but most encouraging. She says if I absolutely relinquish my own notions of things and immerse myself in style pure and simple as found in the classics (17th Century) I’ll come out A Number One. (9 February 1909)

Miss King’s course was to make a lasting impression on Marianne. It was a study of 17th century prose accompanied by the writing of imitations in the style of Sir Francis Bacon, Sir Thomas Browne, Launcelot Andrews, Traherne, Hooker, and others, whom Marianne Moore later called significant to her development as a stylist.

One must not think for a moment that Marianne’s not being allowed to take “major English” dampened the literary life that she knew at college. In letter after letter there is discussion of authors read and the desire to write. The former was occasioned both by the required English courses and the extracurricular reading enjoyed by Marianne and her friends. While the Romantic poets were the most recent works the students read in required English, their casual reading and conversation concerned Meredith, Stevenson, Scott, Kipling, Tennyson, Henry James and many other writers. James maintained a kind of presence on campus. He had spoken there twice in 1904, the year before Marianne matriculated. In 1906, Peggy James, William’s daughter and Henry’s niece, enrolled as a freshman and became a good friend of Marianne’s. Her being on campus caused much talk of “Uncle Henry” and discussions about whether his work was “profound.”

By her sophomore year, Marianne’s classmates knew that she had literary interests: “I have been found twice (in my room) with Emerson in my hand and although I had not a chance to read, either time, have acquired a reputation for great depth” (18 October 1907). That fall, she began to make her mark on the undergraduate literary magazine, Tipyn o’Bob, whose name means “a bit of everyone”: “I have gotten a Tipyn o’Bob position. I deliver copies And collect money for the same in [Pembroke] East, and get my subscription free. Isn’t it great?” (14 October 1906). In January appeared the first of eight short stories she was to publish there, and in February the first of eight poems. The response to her stories usually pleased her, despite some denials: “Isn’t it amazing my figuration in the Tip? I was so surprised at the stray verses. People say the nice things they always say to “authors” but what I like is, that it’s nice people who say them” (12 February 1907) and: “My story has been much appreciated but some how I don’t care a bit. Ellen Thayer whose opinion I like best said my style was good and different from the B.M. style....I have an awful time keeping my mind off the subject of stories. I hate the writing down of them” (10 February 1907). (Ellen Thayer, then the editor of the Tip, would be on the staff when Marianne was editor of The Dial, nineteen years later.) The next week, Marianne and Mary Nearing, the class’s most prolific writer, had a serious talk about responsibilities and the writing of short fiction. Marianne said: “We discussed how much time it was right for me to spend on stories. Mary said a little, I have decided none” (15 February 1907). And the next week, “Stories I shan’t be able to write much now as I need every minute to work. I’m bound I’ll work up if I do nothing else.”

Several of the stories concerned medieval princes and princesses, but two of them express the agony of the young and foiled writer. The first, “The Discouraged Poet,” appeared in April of Marianne’s sophomore year. It tells of a young man who had just come from an elder poet:

The famous bard is quite right. I do not know enough ever to become famous. I shall not try to write. My Lord, he said, I have come to say that I am no longer a poet. Then he paused. You are glad, perhaps? the old man looked hard at the youth and said: I am glad indeed—more glad than I can say, my son....You are young. You do not know enough to write....The poet turned away, and there was an angry look about him....I don’t know? The bard may know but you—my careful guardian, you don’t know about verse—or me. To the winds with distemper. I’ll roam the woods and then, if I wish, I’ll write....The guardian plucked a companion by the sleeve and remarked, “this new decision becomes him, friend, Would you not say so?” “The Discouraged Poet,” Tipyn o’ Bob, 4 (April, 1907), 25.

An explanation in a letter home followed: “As to the significance of my story, I meant it for getting over the discouragements of that particular week that I wrote it and for getting over difficulties, in general but I certainly mean to try the pen off and on through life as an adjunct” (16 April 1907). But the next week, discouragement was still present: “I think fame is a snare and a delusion. My stories are talked
up....Lady Lucy...gives...me a marked bow and still I moralize inwardly and weep, for I can’t ever paint and can’t ever write it seems, and the people I like best aren’t responsive. Well, tut! tut!” (21 April 1907). The following October, Marianne’s Sophomore crisis had been averted but she took no English courses. Still, she produced her second story about a writer. Her description of it:

I have written, what I like better than anything I have ever write before, a thing called The Nature of a Literary Man—perhaps, “Pym””—it expresses nothing but a series of individual impressions in “my latest style” and is crystal clear...it is what James calls the record of “a generation of nervous moods” but has a satisfactory solution. (27 October 1907)

The story’s narrator, Alexander, faces conflict between writing and a more practical profession, cannot perform according to his employer-editor’s requirements, and decides to return home to his guardian, Uncle Stanford. His discovery is much like Marianne’s, torn between her desire to write and the college’s proscription against her majoring in English; “although there are times when I should give anything on earth to have writing a matter of indifference to me...it is undeniably convenient, in time of expressionary need, to be able to say things to the point.” The story attracted considerable attention: “The Tip is out, and Pym, at last evolved—people like it though it troubles me a little—it is but an episode though and I know I can do a better if I try it, when I am feeling least inspired” (26 January 1908). And, later in the spring: “I may be over-confident but I think I shall get there some day—in the matter of writing—if I do not I shall wonder about the justice of my having been plagued with the fever” (22 March 1908). And still later:

My literary prospects are of course infinitesimal but on the score of pleasure, the quill for me. I am fired anew by my late success...2 poems—verses—about 6 lines long a piece which I drew from a clear sky as it were, for nothing—I mean the construction was not the puzzle that of prosody is as I merely wrote them and gave them in—poetry is such a sensitive kind of production, too, that it always tickles me to be “accepted.”—I mean you feel much more foolish in writing bad poetry than in writing bad prose, and more doubly foolish as poetry is unconscious. (2 April 1908)

Marianne was later to change her mind about poetry’s being an unconscious act, but not about the foolishness of writing badly. Not two weeks later, her confidence was shaken again.

My “pomes” seem to have made a sensation to say nothing of my bad prose. I was drifting to biology, through Taylor, when Martha...caught my sleeve and said “congratulations”...why what? said I...haven’t they told you? said Martha—No, said I—why the Dean read out one of your poems and said the other was good....I learn she said “It was such a pity a girl of such ability should be guilty of affectations; that the kind of thing in this story, Philip the Sober, was the kind of thing that makes the college ridiculous to outsiders—“shop-chopping along in the mud,” “her skirt came hitching along carelessly after her,” “Prometheo-trained sensibilities”...Mary consoled me and said the Dean had no right to butt into our affairs and so on—I am personally much interested in the criticism and with feminine ! perversity press on with increased zeal—if I can “do it at all”: discouragements may be left straying to the rear in a trail of foam for all the discouragement I feel....(14 April 1908)

A former classmate who had left college was apprised of the Dean’s comments and wrote a wonderfully poised response to Marianne. In her letter she quoted Emerson’s notion that the person who should be most glad of criticism is the one at whom it is aimed, for he is the one searching for perfection. She went on to say that one should write for one’s own satisfaction and produce his very best work, then let the world say what it will (letter from Marriet Haldeman, 27 May 1908).

In her last year, although she threatened to resign from the Board of “The Tip,” to which she had been appointed as a junior, because she had too much course work, Marianne continued to write and in fact did not resign. She confined her output to four poems and one story, published in the spring semester. One poem commanded the attention of the Greek professor, Dr. Sanders. It read:

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He often expressed a curious wish to be interchangeably man and fish to nibble the bait off the hook, said he, and then slip away like a ghost in the sea.

As she wrote home:

I am not proud of it, but I like the rhythm and I intend to try, till I do write something...These sporadic poems I don’t work over (though my stories I do, so I smile...when people tell me how they like them and talk about writing poetry and so on as if it were gymnastics or piano practice. (14 February 1909)

Dr. Sanders read the poem to his Greek class, pronounced the meter “dithyrambic glyconic,” and later made suggestions for revising the rhythm. He asked her what it meant but, as Marianne wrote,

[I] said I had really put no hard and fast idea, that I excuse myself for writing things that had no idea by making use of the privilege of youth for if I waited until my thoughts no longer were inconsequent, I would not have the incentive to write, perhaps or would have incentive and be ashamed to hazard things by reason of unwelcome stiffness, that it was simply living, in the pleasure of the moment—he seemed satisfied...I felt like a mouse on a very high chair, nevertheless pleased. (15 March 1909)
Perhaps stubbornly, Marianne used the first two lines, rhythm intact, in her poem “The Plumet Basilisk” twenty-four years later.

By the time she graduated in June 1909, Marianne had come a long way from the homemaking freshman of 1905. She determined to learn secretarial skills, it seems in order to make her way into the publishing world, a progression made clear to her in an interview at The Ladies' Home Journal. She had received her first rejection slip from The Atlantic Monthly—for poems, not stories, submitted in her last semester. Her college experiences found their way into later poems: “He Wrote the History Book,” a poem published in The Dial, was occasioned by the remark of a history professor’s son; a comment on men’s need to reserve monuments to themselves, made by President Thomas, occurs in “Marriage,” 1923, as does a line from “The Rape of the Lock,” written by Marianne and classmate Mary Nearing at the time Marianne cut some of her long red hair. Her work on Tipyn o’Bob provided familiarity with the production of a magazine, a useful training for her editorship of The Dial.

But these are the small things. The seeds of so many other characteristics of the future poet are found in her college letters. Her interest in history and politics continued throughout her life and provided subjects for poems. Biology she credited for “precision, economy of statement, logic employed to ends that are disinterested, drawing and identifying.” These, she said, “liberate—at least have some bearing on the imagination” (Marianne Moore Reader, Viking, 1961, pp. 254-255). Required English courses certainly heightened her awareness of the art of the word; she must forever have heard Miss Fullerton’s “Please, a little lucidity! Your obscurity is greater and greater.” And Miss Marsh’s “Be sure you get enough substance; your last paper was a network of quotations.” But Marianne learned to suit herself in these matters and to work out her salvation with diligence.

The lantern of learning flourished for her all her life. We have a taste of the variety of her interests in her splendid report of the topics of her conversations with faculty members at the last reception before graduation. We discussed, she said:

landscape gardening as interpreted by Poe, the phosphorescence of fireflies, Bryn Mawr dramatics, mysticism and biology, the opening prospect of professionalism to Bryn Mawr grads, Whistler, Van Dyke, Childe Hassam, the joy of good marks and the fear at finals of fatalities; society art and their relation to scholarship, cynics and connoisseurs, the relative value of absorbing knowledge and never giving it out, Meredith—the age of his genius, 22-50, or 80, Thomas Wainewright, a horse that shys, the drama, swimming and children….Mr. George Adam Smith, civic and social secretary work. (30 May 1909)

One could set this compendium against her later writings and find correspondences for nearly every item.

But it is perhaps the wisdom, symbolized by Pallas Athena’s lively owl, that makes the strongest impression on the reader of Marianne’s college letters. She became wise in the ways of success and adversity, praise and criticism, hard work and the private consolation of having done one’s best. The seriousness and determina-